

PRESS CONFERENCE:

Rear Admiral Gregory Smith, Director of Communications, Deputy Spokesman, Multi-National Corps – Iraq

DATE:

January 20, 2008

TRANSCRIBED BY:

SOS INTERNATIONAL, LTD.

PARTICIPANTS:

Rear Admiral Greg Smith

REPORTERS:

**Bruno Roper from ABC
Charles Levins from USA Today
Ahmed Jessem from Arabiya Newspaper
Ned Parker from The Los Angeles Times
Gina Chung, The Wall Street Journal
Phil Ittner from CBS
Huta Delhamin from Al Jazeera English
Kian Sadick from NBC News
Kim Gamel from The Associated Press**

REPORTERS 1-21

***REP1 = REPORTER 1**

***INT = INTERPRETER**

RDML SMITH: Good afternoon. As-Salāmu `Alaykum. Operation Phantom Phoenix, an Iraq-wide operation targeting al-Qaeda, has been underway for now two weeks. And the effects of these combined coalition and Iraqi security force operations has been substantial. Since it began earlier this month, Operation Phantom Phoenix has conducted 18 battalion-level operations detaining 1,023 terrorists and killed 121 others. Among those captured or killed were 92 high-value targets. Coalition and Iraqi security forces have also found and cleared 351 caches, cleared 410 improvised explosive devices, also cleared three vehicle bomb and improvised explosive device factories as well as four tunnel complexes. We've provided several briefings over the past year focused specifically on operations against al-Qaeda, and while considerable progress has been made, we still have much work to do. I thought it would be helpful to spend some time today discussing what still remains as Iraq's most lethal enemy and its greatest threat to peace: al-Qaeda – Iraq. We've reported all this information during the course of 2007 and are sharing today as a summary to provide more of a holistic understanding of al-Qaeda – Iraq. What is al-Qaeda – Iraq? Who are its leaders? And who makes up the rank and file? How are they organized? Funded? And how do they operate? And finally, what effect do they have on the people living here in Iraq by their

operations? We've provided some perspective and insights in these important issues by summarizing the fight against al-Qaeda over the past year. Al-Qaeda sees Iraq as its caliphate, its center of struggle and dominance for establishing its Taliban-like ideology in the heart of the Arab world. Al-Qaeda – Iraq is foreign led with its current leader, an Egyptian named Abu Ayyub al-Masri, having replaced the previous leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian who was killed in June, 2006. The majority of the senior leadership is foreign as I mentioned. The most senior Iraqi, Khalid al-Mashadani, was captured in July, 2007, and provided considerable insights into how Iraq was...how al-Qaeda organized itself here in Iraq. Of course, the rank-and-file fighters are mostly Iraqis. Some have little choice as the insurgency destroyed the economy and pride drove their allegiance to al-Qaeda in order to put food on the table for their families. Al-Qaeda – Iraq used the most barbaric of tactics to intimidate Shi'as, Sunni, Kurds, and Christians. They executed young and old, men and women. They beheaded fathers in front of their children. They extorted, kidnapped, and murdered for little or no reason. To even the most casual observer, it appeared that all Iraq was the enemy of al-Qaeda. No Iraqi was spared from their wrath. A major weapon of al-Qaeda has been the suicide bomber, 90 percent of whom are foreigners. The suicide bomber became a spark that ignited ethno-sectarian violence and drew all Iraq into

near civil war. So now let me turn to how the picture looked at the beginning of 2007. This map represents al-Qaeda – Iraq’s presence in December of 2006. Dark red represents what we assessed at that time as their operating areas—areas where they had some level of freedom of movement and sanctuary to conduct their operations from. And the lighter red represents areas of population influence. The image on the bottom, right-hand corner is a map that we captured early last year outlining the al-Qaeda strategy to overtake Baghdad by controlling first the outer belts and then Baghdad itself. This map was captured from al-Qaeda – Iraq in March of last year. It represents the area of operations that they see their control and oversight as they perceived it at that time. The red represents areas they asserted were under their full control or partial control with the south of Iraq as the obvious exception and those living there labeled as “rejectionists.” The differences in the two maps are striking examples of al-Qaeda’s use of propaganda to distort reality; in this case, lying to their own fighters. There are many instances of the barbaric tactics fueled by the extreme Taliban-like ideology to justify the indiscriminate use of violence against mostly innocent Iraqi civilians, many of whom were unknowingly labeled apostates for their refusal to take up arms against coalition and Iraqi forces or aid the terrorists. Two such of examples are the Tal Afar attack last March which killed and injured 223 Iraqis. And the attack in

August against the Yazidi people who were targeted by multiple car bombs that killed and injured 796 civilians. These bombings were just two of the more than 4,500 attacks by al-Qaeda – Iraq in 2007 that targeted civilians. Al-Qaeda murdered 3,870 Iraqis and injured nearly 18,000 innocent civilians. The violence peaked in March and April of this year and throughout the summer. As we pressed our operations through the summer, the number of high-profile explosions slowly began to decrease. However, al-Qaeda continues to use their primary weapons, suicides and vehicle bombs, in an attempt to reignite ethno-sectarian violence. As coalition and Iraqi security forces have cleared al-Qaeda's sanctuaries, numerous torture houses and mass graves have been found. These images were taken from an al-Qaeda torture manual and show the brutal methods used to torture Iraqis for something as simple as smoking cigarettes or having a brother in the Iraqi security forces. They tortured and murdered men, women, and children. And through the use of terror and intimidation, controlled the populations where they were present. Before I highlight some of the major operations in progress to rid al-Qaeda from Iraq, I think it's important to note the role played by the Iraqi security forces and by the Iraqi people. Iraqi security forces continue to grow, to develop their capabilities, and to shoulder more of the responsibility for providing security for their country. In 2007, the Iraqi security forces grew by more than

106,000 personnel, a surge of more than three times that of the coalition. The force now stands at over 567,000 personnel. The Ministries of Defense and Interior invested nearly \$3 billion in foreign military sales in 2007 to purchase equipment and supplies. By year's end, some 140 battalions of Army, police, national police, and special operations units were in the fight. About 122 of those 140 battalions are capable of taking the lead in conducting operations. All Iraqi battalions are heavily involved in combat operations and they have been increasingly the first line of defense with losses two to three times that of the coalition. Beyond the increased capacity and capability of the Iraqi security forces to take on al-Qaeda, perhaps even more important was the formation of Awakening Groups across Iraq. What began in Al Anbar in early 2007 as the original Awakening by Sunni tribes rising up against al-Qaeda – Iraq, they worked with and increased the capacity of Iraqi and coalition security forces to improve security in areas threatened by al-Qaeda – Iraq and other militant groups. Today, more than 130 Concerned Local Citizen Groups are providing neighborhood security throughout Iraq with over 80,000 active members—80 percent of whom are Sunni, 20 percent Shi'a. And many of these groups comprised of mixed Sunni and Shi'a members. Under the control of local Iraqi security or coalition forces, these brave Iraqis have turned the tide against al-Qaeda and are no longer afraid to

fight against the ideology and the violence. We've all witnessed the courageous acts of the Concerned Local Citizens. And even as al-Qaeda has made them their enemy, they continue to stand up for their neighborhoods and are making a tremendous difference in restoring peace and normalcy. Progress depends on squeezing al-Qaeda in every direction and with just about every possible means. This is much more than just our operations targeting al-Qaeda. It's a multidimensional approach using all elements of combat power integrated with economic, social, and governance programs. Progress made in security must be followed quickly by improved economic security with employment being foremost. The Government of Iraq is acutely aware of the challenges and has worked side by side with provincial leadership to address many of their needs and concerns. All of this will need to be developed further in order to continue to disrupt al-Qaeda and limit their access to safe havens and operating bases. With this as a backdrop, let me now turn to discussing a few of the high-profile terrorists that were either killed or captured during operations by coalition and Iraqi security forces supported by the Iraqi people in 2007. Haitham Sabah Shaker Mohammed al-Badri was the emir of greater Samarra and was the mastermind behind the destruction of the Samarra mosque in February of 2006. He operated the Samarra terrorist network responsible for improvised explosive devices and vehicle

bomb attacks. He orchestrated the Kirkuk courthouse bombing in June 23 of 2006 that killed 20 and injured more than 100. He masterminded a vehicle bomb attack against the Iraqi Army checkpoint in Samarra on August 28th, 2006. Twenty-nine Iraqi security forces were killed and another 66 injured, as well as 51 Iraqi civilians injured. He was killed in a targeted raid this past August. Khalil al-Mashhadani was the senior Iraqi in the al-Qaeda – Iraq network. He was the principal intermediary between al-Qaeda's senior leadership and Abu Ayyub al-Masri. He ordered all Iraqi emirs to wear suicide vests—a trend we're seeing still to this day. He confirmed in interrogation that al-Qaeda lost the Al Anbar safe havens due to coalition operations and tribal engagement by the Awakening Groups. He was captured last July and sentenced to death by an Iraqi court this past September. Abu Usama al-Tunisi was the emir of the Southern Baghdad belts and a Tunisian national. He was a foreign terrorist facilitator with strong connections in the Levant and Syria. He was responsible for multiple vehicle bomb attacks in the Baghdad area, participated in the Baghdad Sheraton hotel bombing. He was a key communications link between foreign facilitators and senior al-Qaeda leadership. He was killed in targeted operations this past September. Muthanna was the emir of the Iraq-Syria border. He was a key foreign terrorist facilitator responsible for the movement of personnel between the Syrian

border and Iraq. He had direct contact with Abu Ayyub al-Masri. When we captured Muthanna...I'm sorry. At the site of his death, material that was captured provided insights on the foreign terrorist network spread across the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe. He was killed this past September. I want to spend a few moments discussing the material we found at the site of Muthanna's death. I mentioned earlier that the majority of al-Qaeda's leadership and many of its fighters are foreign-born. During operations against Muthanna, coalition forces captured over five terabytes of data detailing more than 750 foreign terrorists from 22 countries that entered Iraq between August, 2006 and August, 2007. From this, we learned that the majority of foreign terrorists enter Iraq to carry out suicide attacks, signing a pledge that formally commits them to that duty. Over 90 percent of suicide bombers are foreign terrorists, as I mentioned earlier. And these high-profile attacks account for a large majority of the Iraqi losses inflicted by al-Qaeda. Abu Yaqub al-Masri was a member of the original leadership of al-Qaeda – Iraq and an Egyptian national. He was the previous military and spiritual leader in al-Qaeda, I'm sorry, in Al Anbar, then took on responsibilities as emir of Taji. [He was] responsible for a series of attacks and car bombs in Iraq, including bombs that killed over 200 people in Baghdad. He provided guidance and direction for attack planning, coordination, and execution, and he had direct access to

al-Qaeda's senior leadership. He was killed in August. Umar Wahdallah Dod al-Zangana was the Baghdad military emir. He ran al-Qaeda – Iraq networks responsible for hundreds of civilian murders within Baghdad, planned and directed vehicle bombs, suicide bombs, improvised explosive devices, and sniper operations. He used foreign terrorists in vehicle bomb attacks throughout the Baghdad area, planned and directed the Baghdad chlorine attacks, personally beheaded two Russian diplomats, had direct access to AAM, and he was sentenced in December to death by an Iraqi court. Overall, in operations against al-Qaeda in Iraq in 2007, resulted in the capture of 8,800 terrorists while an additional 2,400 were killed. Of those we captured or killed 52 senior emirs, 32 improvised explosive device leaders, 24 cell leaders, and 92 other facilitators. The combined efforts of the coalition and Iraqi forces led to a much different outlook for al-Qaeda – Iraq at the conclusion of 2007, as shown in this map. Their areas of control and influence were diminished. We reduced their vehicle-borne improvised explosive device networks. We disrupted the flow of foreign terrorists, weapons, and logistics materials. We have kept constant pressure on al-Qaeda forcing their leadership to be on the run. Al-Qaeda has alienated the very people it needed for support. Citizens have awakened to defend their neighborhoods and their way of life. And finally, the Iraqi security forces have surged and

are on the front lines of the fight. As Operation Phantom Phoenix continues, we know that this remains a tough fight and one that has had and will continue to have dark and difficult days and weeks. The way ahead will not be easy. Inevitably, there will be unforeseen challenges that will emerge. Nevertheless, we remain committed to pursuing al-Qaeda in order to ensure security and stability for all Iraq. And with that, I'd be happy to take your questions. We'll take it on any other subject you'd like as well. Please go ahead.

REP1: I am Bruno Roper, ABC. I'm just wondering, of all the people you've talked about who were detained and killed, who do you see as the most significant of those as characters?

RDML SMITH: Well, if you consider that Muthanna and as a foreign terrorist facilitator, as an individual, the network they ran, very significant. But I guess as significant is the material that was found that really gave the insights into that network and to understand how foreign fighters were employed inside Iraq. But as importantly, how they were brought into Iraq. What was the network that fed that? And that gave us great insight. The details of those individual 750 Iraq... foreigners that had come in gave us a great deal of information about routes, origins, financing, and so forth, and it has made a big difference in our ability to bring down—by about 50 percent—the

number of foreign fighters currently coming into the country. Yes, sir.

REP2: Charles Levins from USA Today. Can you talk about how you used those records you found and specifically what you learned about the routes and the countries where they're coming from to try to not just fight them here in Iraq but try to stop the flow from, you know, whether it is North Africa or Saudi? And how, you know what I'm saying, how that was applied to...?

RDML SMITH: This became, really, a partnership not only between bilateral relations with countries in the region and around the world but also, from a law enforcement point of view, there has been an opportunity to exploit the knowledge there of who the handlers were in key countries, to work with the governments in those regions to make them understand—if they didn't already know—the level of throughput that was coming from those countries of terrorists, and then working very closely with some of the more significant players in the region, like Syria and Saudi Arabia, has made a tremendous difference, again, at reducing the flow of foreign fighters. So it really became an ability to work from an interagency point of view as well as bilaterally with nations to ensure that they understood how they could support reducing the

flow of foreign fighters and reduce the violence here in Iraq and elsewhere.

REP2: You said you are working very closely with Syria now? I mean will you qualify it as very closely?

RDML SMITH: Yeah. The connections with Syria obviously are not directly from Multi-National Force – Iraq. But from an interagency point of view, obviously there's relationships there that can work through the diplomatic channels and law enforcement channels that have paid some dividends. Yes, sir.

REP3: Asks question in Arabic.

INT: Ahmed Jessem from al Arabiya Newspaper. You mentioned...you said that the majority of the al-Qaeda leaders are from the...are foreigners. So what is the number that have been foreigners that have been killed and...through your intelligence? And how many do you think are still there?

RDML SMITH: Well, it's a good question. I don't have the specific number on the number of foreigners that have been killed inside Iraq. A significant number of the suicide bombers have been successful in their operations, and then clearly they died as a result of the conduct of

those. And they were assessed to be about 90 percent to be foreigner. We have a small population of foreigners in detention. And again, a large part of our operations are targeting al-Qaeda's rank and file as well. So I don't have a specific number for you. But we assess that the individuals that are coming into the country—around 50 percent of those—50 to 60 percent—end up being suicide bombers and the other 40 to 50 percent conduct other operations in support of al-Qaeda here. And our operations have been very successful. Sir.

REP4: Thanks. Ned Parker with the L.A. Times. Just wondering, what are Syria and Saudi Arabia doing specifically that's different now from, let's say in the summer period, to stop this flow?

RDML SMITH: Again, specifically, the countries have taken steps, I think, in a couple of key areas. One, I think, is a greater understanding on their part of the impact as a regional partner in emboldening al-Qaeda here in Iraq and the impact it could have on their country long-term. As a regional partner in providing secure border, it prevents the flow back and forth of terrorism. So, from a long-term point of view, Syria and Saudi's interests are for their own security of their own borders and their own security within their countries. But specifically, they worked to identify profiles of individuals. In the

case of Saudi Arabia, they've reduced...made it more difficult for single males, for instance, to obtain visas without more questioning and determining what their real intents are as they board an airplane for Syria as an example. Syria has taken steps on the border; they've increased the number of border patrols and checkpoints. And so, various steps have been taken that have been constructive and very helpful to reduce the foreign fighter flow. But it's still a concern as the numbers coming across the borders continue, but at reduced levels.

REP5:

Gina Chung, Wall Street Journal. Can you also comment on the recent violence in the south and the security prospects there given the coalition doesn't have a big force there? And I also had another question regarding al-Qaeda being squeezed here in Iraq. Do you—in terms of intelligence you've gotten from other parts of the world—have a sense that some of those people then are going to other parts of the world in Afghanistan or other places given sort of the pressure that they're facing here?

RDML SMITH:

I think the last couple of days you've witnessed, certainly, a very heightened level of security in the Basra and Nasiriyah area that has been dealt with very professionally by, in the case of Basra, Major General Jalil and Major General Mohan, through both the Army and

police force of Basra, dealt with that situation very professionally. And although there was results...there was loss of life on both the police and Army side, as well as innocent civilians, they now have that area under control and have done a tremendous job of quelling that violence. I think what you're seeing though is an increased capacity in the case...part of the Iraqi security forces to handle security in their provinces. Basra, as you know, was turned over to Iraqi control in December. A long transition took place between...leading up to that point with British forces having been supporting the Basra Province for the last several years. They remain in a strategic over watch. We were in very close contact with the Iraqi security forces throughout that period of time. They had the situation well under hand and dealt with it very professionally. On the second issue, yes. When you consider that al-Qaeda itself, the senior leadership of al-Qaeda, has a much larger footprint of activity across the world. Whether or not foreign fighters that are...would be destined for Iraq are going elsewhere is hard to know. But clearly the...dealing with the foreign fighter population here inside Iraq has been very critical to reducing al-Qaeda's threats to Iraqis and that's our main mission here. Sir.

REP6: Asks question in Arabic.

INT: Question. There has been certain operations in Basra and Nasiriyah

and also there has been an [unintelligible] operation in Najaf. Do you think the Iraqi forces will handle the situation in Najaf if something similar happened, or will the coalition forces give support as well?

RDML SMITH: Again, I think it's purely up to the Iraqi security forces that are in the area to make those determinations of whether or not they need coalition support. And to date, they've addressed the concerns locally. A training force is present in those areas. And they've had an opportunity over the last several years to build up their capability; not only in the way they are trained and equipped, but also in their command and control. And much of their leadership now has had a seasoned amount of activity to be able to deal with crises like that. So I suspect in Najaf, as an example, if there is a situation in Najaf that the local leadership there will make a decision whether or not coalition support is needed. But if it is needed, we'll be there to support it. In the back, please.

REP7: [Unintelligible], Japanese Daily Newspaper. During your war against al-Qaeda in Iraq from...sorry. During your war with the...against al-Qaeda in Iraq, do you get any Iraqi help from other Sunni militias like [unintelligible] or the Sahwa, the "waking up"? Have you get any...help?

RDML SMITH: Yes. The tremendous amount of support comes from the Awakening Groups. And what, again, what was witnessed in Anbar and the ability of the Iraqi people to make a decision to turn against al-Qaeda has been the single biggest component to the changed environment here inside Iraq. Al-Qaeda no longer has free sanctuary to operate thinking that the local people will take care of them—won't, in fact, turn them over to Iraqi security forces. And what we're seeing in Diyala is an example of that; whereas forces operate in the area for a period of time, people begin to build up confidence that the security forces will protect them, and they begin to provide intelligence and tips to lead you to the remaining elements of al-Qaeda. So, yes; the Iraqi people, through the Awakening Groups and others, have made a tremendous difference. Do you have a follow up?

REP7: Yes. But we hear from the people that many of al-Qaeda fighters became against al-Qaeda now. They became with Sahwa or the "waking up," what you call them. They are fighting al-Qaeda. What do you think about that? Most of them are killers.

RDML SMITH: Well, again, as my remarks pointed out, much of the rank and file of al-Qaeda, in the early days especially, was Iraqis who really had

no other choice and were deprived of any way to make a living. The economy was destroyed by al-Qaeda's presence. They were intimidated. Their families were tortured. And they chose to survive by joining al-Qaeda's ranks. And once they were given the opportunity to make a decision to oppose al-Qaeda, they have turned away from that ideology and that hatred and that violence, and are now working with the coalition and the Government of Iraq to root out those remaining elements of al-Qaeda. So, that's a very positive step and we welcome it. Yes, sir.

REP8: Admiral, Phil Ittner from CBS. The other big bug-bear that the U.S. military's been talking about for years is, of course, Iran. There's been a lot of talk about an up tick in attacks being sourced or connected to Iran and I wonder if you could touch on that?

RDML SMITH: The discussion recently was on the up tick or the increase in the number of explosively-formed penetrators that we saw in early January, both those we were finding before they exploded and those that did explode. For a period of about two weeks there was a rate of two to three times the normal...what we had seen sort of leveling out as the normal rate at the end of 2007. But in that subsequent week, the third week now of January, we've seen those numbers come back to normal levels. So there was an increase; we don't

know why precisely. Whether that was a focused use of the improvised explosive device, this EFP, during that period of time and whether those were directed by Iran, in this case, if that leads to your question. But there was an increase clearly of the use of that weapon and now they've returned to normal levels. In a broader sense, just to discuss the issue of Iran's influence here in Iraq, we continue to see a negative influence by Iran in the training and financing of Iraq's activities here. The special groups that we've discussed in the past which are trained inside Iran continue to be trained in Iran as late as last fall, after the pledge made by the Iranian government to the Iraqi government that it would support a more peaceful transition here in Iraq. So there's a mixed signal, a mixed set of circumstances associated with Iran's involvement here in Iraq. And while we don't have direct evidence of the use of weapons or of the direction of the use of weapons by Iran, we clearly see their intent of training and financing continues today. Yes, sir.

REP8:

On Iran, what's the latest on the bilateral talks between Iran and you guys? It seems like in December there was one that was supposed to be was canceled and we haven't heard much since. What's going on there?

RDML SMITH: Well, the U.S. has stated its intent to support sitting down with Iraq, on Iraq's invitation, with Iran for these discussions and they have yet to be scheduled. Yes, ma'am.

REP9: Huta[ph] Delhamin[ph] from Al Jazeera English. I was wondering, did you...when all these weapons you found with al-Qaeda fighters, were any made in Iran? Did you find any EFPs with al-Qaeda?

RDML SMITH: I don't think that we're seeing any of the Iranian-made weapons found in areas where we know precisely were controlled by al-Qaeda. We have no evidence of that. That's a good question though. But we have, as you know, in 2007 uncovered twice the number of caches we found in all of 2006. I just mentioned the numbers found in Diyala. And so it's a good question. But no, we're not seeing a direct link between al-Qaeda control. Now that said, al-Qaeda clearly can get access to weapons through other means besides directly from Iran, for instance, because they'll sweep up munitions as it goes along with its operations. But we're not seeing the evidence of Iran providing weapons to al-Qaeda. Yes, please.

REP10: Hi. I'm Kian Sadick, NBC News. I wanted to ask about the Shi'a groups who have been speaking out on their frustrations of the

situation and various threats about them, you know, joining up and fighting back again. Because various areas in Iraq which have been called success stories are fully Sunni, whereas the Shi'a and the Christians who used to live in those areas are still displaced in other areas. And have you had any sort of communications with them? Is there anything being done about that?

RDML SMITH: I think if I understand your question, we do see a frustration by the Shi'a of the same kind of violence that, really, al-Qaeda had placed on the Sunni populations—in a different way, in a sense. In the case here, we're talking about Shi'a populations that are having to deal with basic gang-like activity, criminal activity, which makes any sort of normal life very difficult for the average Shi'a family. And what they want—just like the Sunni want—is a way to live a peaceful life; for the children to go to school and get a decent job and so forth. And I believe you're seeing individuals...and that's why we're seeing an increased number of these Concerned Local Citizens coming from Shi'a neighborhoods—20 percent now are Shi'a. And while those are in the neighborhoods just to the south of Baghdad, there are no Concerned Local Citizens in the deep, deep south of Bagh...of Iraq.

REP10: [unintelligible] Muqtada al-Sadr coming out and saying he's going

to, you know, he's going to stop...he's going to start fighting again. He's not going to continue the ceasefire, the six-month ceasefire that he had called because he's, you know, because his group is getting more frustrated. They are quite a big group and if the Mahdi Army begins to act up again, what sort of plan did you have to combat such a thing?

RDML SMITH: First of all, I've seen those reports but I'm not certain that I've got the level of confidence you may have on the accuracy of that kind of reporting. But I do believe that Muqtada al-Sadr understands as well as anyone the dangers of going back to a level of violence that really tarnished the Sadr trend movement and began to, again, erode the confidence of the people as to what they stood for, which was a political, peaceful process for Iraq. And so the pledge of Muqtada al-Sadr to have a ceasefire—to have his forces stand down from any violent activity—has been a very, very positive influence here in Iraq. And I believe the Shi'a people understand that, and he understands that. And so we're hopeful that that long-term objective of peace and security in Iraq is fulfilled by Sadr and others who can make a big difference in Iraq. I'll take your question.

REP11: Asks question in Arabic.

INT: Is there any statistics regarding the flow of the foreign fighters...of

the Arab fighters or foreigners from the borders? And also, do you have statistics of the newly...those who joined al-Qaeda inside Iraq?

RDML SMITH: We had historically...late summer we were seeing as many as 110 foreigners come into Iraq on a monthly basis, and the vast majority of those came through Syria. We're now, in late 2007, seeing numbers around 40 to 50 a month. Again, still a dominant number coming through Syria. So, around a 50 percent reduction in the number of foreign fighters coming into Iraq.

REP11: Speaks in Arabic.

INT: What are the statistics concerning the Iraqis that work inside al-Qaeda? Do you have any recent statistics of the Iraqis that work inside al-Qaeda?

RDML SMITH: Really, to quantify the size of al-Qaeda inside Iraq in terms of who, on any given day, is aligning themselves with al-Qaeda is a very difficult metric to come up with, and so I would hazard trying to give you a number of Iraqis who are fighting alongside—today—al-Qaeda. Again, we're seeing a transition over the last year in which individuals who, clearly, once were, are no longer. And so...and it's very difficult to quantify that situation. But the positive trend is that

more Iraqis are choosing not to align with al-Qaeda, and that's a very, very encouraging sign. Sure.

REP12: I was just wondering if you could actually give us a breakdown on the nationalities in terms of which group is the largest coming in and, you know, break it down.

RDML SMITH: Okay. I think I've got some statistics I'll be able to.... The largest group has always been coming from Saudi Arabia, just below 50 percent of the foreign fighters historically have come through Saudi Arabia...from Saudi Arabia. The next largest group was Libya. Yemen. Syria. Tunisia. And Morocco. There's some from Central Europe.

REP12: Where in Central Europe?

RDML SMITH: France. I should mention Algeria as well. Egypt, as an example, is...very few come from Egypt. Jordan very few, two percent.

REP12: How many from France?

RDML SMITH: Very small numbers; just a couple. So the distribution...what we learned through the Muthanna captured documents was the

role...numbers of foreign fighters coming out of Libya was a number higher than we originally assessed. We also assessed a higher percentage that had actually come in through Syria than we originally had thought. And the rest of our information that we historically had developed our understanding on was fairly accurate and reinforced by the Muthanna papers in Sinjar.

REP12: Sir, in Libya and Saudi Arabia, the security forces there have arrested people based on the information the United States has submitted to the authorities?

RDML SMITH: I don't know specifically whether individuals that.... Again, the information we had was on historically who had already come into the country and who had already...and, therefore, had been fighting here during the August, 2006, to August, 2007, timeframe. We weren't providing information directly on individuals who now were in their country that could be dealt with from a law enforcement point of view. But the trends and the numbers was what we shared for them to deal with. Sir. Front row, please. I guess, back to...

REP13: Asks question in Arabic.

INT: Question from Al-Babalia TV. Do you think that Operation Fardh

al-Qanoon in Baghdad...do you think that Operation Fardh al-Qanoon that has been conducted by the Iraqi armed forces, do you think that it contributed in eliminating al-Qaeda or reducing al-Qaeda's effect in Baghdad?

RDML SMITH: Fardh al-Qanoon, which is a joint operation between coalition forces and Iraqi security forces, has been extremely successful in removing al-Qaeda from Baghdad. It has not completely removed al-Qaeda from every neighborhood in Baghdad, but it certainly has reduced their influence in Baghdad. More specifically, our operations worked to target al-Qaeda in the belts around Baghdad which is where al-Qaeda traditionally had built up its vehicle bomb factories, much of its training, and where the al-Qaeda spent their hours planning to attack areas inside Baghdad. Because we've had success in the Baghdad belts, you're seeing a reduced influence of al-Qaeda here in Baghdad. That's made the major impact to the security here inside the capitol. Sir.

REP14: Can you go over where you think the main safe havens of al-Qaeda are right now? And also how all the operations for the past three weeks may have rearranged what existed right before that in terms of safe havens and concentrations of al-Qaeda?

RDML SMITH: Yeah. It's...the number of safe havens now has been dramatically reduced. Our operations have put enough force on the ground with Iraqi security forces, coalition operating in areas south of Baghdad, up through Diyala into the Diyala River Valley, and then into the provinces north into Mosul in such a way that the al-Qaeda leadership and much of its rank and file are on the run. So, to say that they've got a true sanctuary where they have impunity from our forces is becoming less of a metric for them and more of a benefit to us because they are on the run. But they do remain, clearly, in concentrated areas in Diyala, to the north in the Diyala River Valley. There certainly are concentrations of al-Qaeda, in small numbers, to the south of Baghdad. But as they push forward out of the major cities, what al-Qaeda is...the greatest handicap to al-Qaeda is they begin to lose its main influence on population centers. Its main source of funding dries up because it no longer can intimidate and extort funds from businessmen and so forth. Kidnapping and extortion becomes less profitable because you're in more rural areas. And in that sense, al-Qaeda is having a very difficult time financing and maintaining its operational base. And if they're on the run, they're less likely to be doing planning—deliberative planning—against civilian targets. And that's...I think that's where you're seeing the increased levels of violence...the decreasing levels of violence associated with their instability and

their moving around.

REP14: How often...can you be a little more specific about is Diyala right now the largest concentration, largest presence of al-Qaeda? Can you talk a little bit how Mosul figures into that? And then specifically what parts south of Baghdad?

RDML SMITH: I think if we throw up the last map we had....can you put that up on the screen, please? The last map there gave you exactly the answer to your question. I mean we...in a general sense, you're seeing the dark red areas to the southeast of Baghdad. And that slice to the northeast of Baquba, up into the western province of Kirkuk areas, and then, of course, surrounding Mosul. And you can see some red pockets there in the eastern corridors of Anbar. That's where we assess today al-Qaeda is operating from and has forces that are conducting training and conducting planning and building of bombs and so forth. And that's why in the last few weeks we've seen a large number of caches found in, for instance, where they had been storing and making up these large bomb factories in the Baquba area...north of the Baquba area. So that's again, that's the [unintelligible] to answer your question.

REP14: Which is the largest would you say?

RDML SMITH: Well, largest; I think the real issue is where is the greatest influence being exerted from. And Mosul will continue to be a center of influence for...center of gravity for al-Qaeda because of its key network facilitation there; both financing and foreign fighters, the flow through Mosul is critical for al-Qaeda in Iraq. But from an operational point of view, the closer reaches to Baghdad which has been their principal target, would make the areas of Diyala and to the south of Baghdad their most critical in terms of their operating capacity. So it's a different answer from numbers, but it's really on what their intent is. Yes, sir.

REP15: Asks question in Arabic.

INT: The experience of JAM or the freezing, do you think that the...you can release the members of JAM so that you can reach further democracy in Iraq?

RDML SMITH: These are decisions for the Iraqi government to make regarding the detention of former Sadr trend members, JAM members. The individuals that are out today conducting criminal activity clearly are no longer associated with Muqtada al-Sadr, because Muqtada al-Sadr has told those individuals to cease their operations. And he himself has said they are criminals and they must be dealt with

legally; and they are being dealt with legally. As to individuals in detention, again, that's a Government of Iraq issue dealing with long term...this reconciliation issue of making decisions about how to deal with that. But criminals are being dealt with as outside the Sadr trend, outside Jaish al-Mahdi because they're conducting activities which clearly go against the rule of law here in Iraq. I think all the way in the back.

REP16: Asks question in Arabic.

INT: Question from al Watan TV. When al-Qaeda was eliminated in Anbar Province, they found a safe haven in Diyala. Do you think the leaders of MNF think...do you think that there is another safe haven or will there be another safe haven for al-Qaeda in case al-Qaeda has been eliminated in Diyala?

RDML SMITH: Our goal is to not provide any safe haven in Iraq for al-Qaeda. And it's the Iraqi people's goal to not provide that safe haven. And that's where this...really this whole partnership between the Iraqi people and its security forces and the coalition has made the difference as it made in Anbar, and it is now making in areas like Diyala. Safe havens can really only be achieved by al-Qaeda if the Iraqi people themselves feel so intimidated and so unsure about whether or not they can turn over...turn in these individuals because they don't

have the confidence in their security forces. That has changed over the last year. And I think what's happening in Diyala is a good example of the slow, slow grind of building up a relationship with the Iraqi people in those neighborhoods and villages for the trust and confidence that they need to have in order to make those tough calls about turning people in. Because it's very dangerous to them to make those decisions and we understand that. But they have not—just to be clear—al-Qaeda has not completely left the Anbar Province, as an example. Again, that map shows you there's still pockets of al-Qaeda. There was explosions yesterday in Ramadi. So we're reminded that al-Qaeda continues to be a threat. The good news is they're out of all the major population centers, except for Mosul, where they still retain some capability. And that has been a big impact on reducing the violence here. Yes, ma'am.

REP17:

Do you think they heard from their Awakening Council? Some of them say that they have been infiltrated by al-Qaeda. And even though these guys say they are “repentants,” what actually they are doing is providing intelligence to al-Qaeda and then in turn, targeting these local concerned citizens. So, how can you vet really who is part of these local concerned citizens? And then, isn't there a risk here of having an inter-Sunni fight in the sense that al-Qaeda could start attacking more and more of these Awakening Councils

as they spread more and more in the streets and in other provinces?

RDML SMITH: Well, there's a couple of checks and balances as to who is part of an Awakening Group. First of all, it's built around a tribal relationship. And the tribal leaders, I think, know better than anyone who they can trust and who they cannot. Secondly, they all go through the screening, so we have some sense not—we have more than some—we have a good sense of whether or not the individuals have had a criminal...or have had other information in the past that would link them to criminal activity. That's not to say that al-Qaeda has not found a way to infiltrate some members, some groups; that clearly could be the case. But I do believe that the Awakening leadership understands that responsibility to police up within their own ranks who is and who is not part of the group. And to the degree that we can vet that through our process of screening, I think has been fairly well done. Up in the Diyala area, for instance, in...before a commander there left last December, he mentioned that there was internal policing and there had been individuals who had been let go because of the, really, the lack of confidence in their loyalty. But yes, it is a concern. It is something that must be addressed. And al-Qaeda clearly has an interest in trying to intimidate, perhaps even through infiltration of the Awakening Groups because of the power that that represents for the Iraqi people. Yes, sir. The front row,

please. Front row, please.

REP18: Asks question in Arabic.

INT: There are some documents at the Ministry of Interior that convict some of the Awakening leaders or the commanders that actually inside al-Qaeda. Is that true?

RDML SMITH: I'm not aware there's specific...you're saying there's specific documents that would indict current leaders of Awakening Groups. Is that correct?

REP18: Speaks in Arabic.

INT: There are some documents at the Ministry of Interior that convict some of the Awakening groups or the commanders that they are also involved in terrorist acts and also part of Al-Qaeda. Is that true?

RDML SMITH: I'm not aware of any specific individuals currently part of the Awakening Groups which the Government of Iraq has identified to us as individuals for which they have issued warrants for their arrests. You used the word convicted, so it sounds like it went through a court. I think you mean there are individuals that they are concerned about. We are not aware of any list per se. Straight back.

In the corner. All the way in the corner, please. We'll come back. In the third row, please. Okay.

REP19: Asks question in Arabic.

INT: Question from Radio Sawa. All that you have mentioned concerning the details about al-Qaeda and also especially what's going on in Iraq, we still witness some deterioration considering... regarding the economical situation. We'd like to know your stance regarding the security situation that witnessed a stability in the few months...the past few months. Do you have some concern...do you have some fear that this could collapse at any minute? The other question concerning the importance in the Iraqi media recently, concerning the intelligence...

I'm sorry, I didn't get the second question.

RDML SMITH: I'll come back to your second question but...

INT: Yes, sir.

RDML SMITH: We've said for quite some time, and I said that in remarks today, the importance of following behind security with economic and other programs of development is very, very critical. We understand that, again, much of the insurgency has been fueled by a lack of

opportunities and a lack of opportunity to make a solid wage doing an honest job...an honest day's work. And unfortunately, that led many to participate in activities which were really against the better...the future of Iraq. And the good side of this, of course, is that people have changed, and they have made a decision to participate in a more positive way. But you're exactly right. The steps that need to be taken now, today, by the Government of Iraq and by other partners to participate in this process are ongoing and are very much the commitment of the Government of Iraq to do that. And I think that in 2008, we'll continue to see steady progress in areas of economic development. I would argue that there has been significant steps taken to rebuild infrastructure. If you go to cities like Fallujah and Ramadi, you're seeing a rebirth of major cities. If you visit many of the neighborhoods in Iraq, you're seeing a rebirth of many of those neighborhoods. So, there is economic development. There are people who are returned from being displaced or refugees to open up businesses and shops. That's a positive step. The encouragement here has to be that security will remain and that the investments these people are making are going to be long term...are able to be sustained in the long term. And I know there's great concern and anxiety over that. But the assurances we can give is that the coalition will partner with the Government of Iraq to maintain that security for as long as it's

needed. Third row, please.

REP20: Hi. Kim Gamel with AP. There was a reported mortar attack against the Green Zone yesterday and one earlier this year, I think, as well. Are you seeing...can you confirm the one yesterday? And are you seeing an up tick in those? And I have a second question as well. I wonder if you could comment on...going back to the clashes in Nasiriyah and Basra, can you comment on if the military...how concerned it is with the Soldiers of Heaven group?

RDML SMITH: First of all, we don't typically comment from the podium on indirect fire and whether or not rounds impacted certain areas of the Green Zone. I will say that the level of violence across Baghdad has been similarly witnessed inside the Green Zone. And I'll just leave it at that, that the numbers are dramatically off of what they were last summer, certainly. As far as the group that identifies themselves as the Soldiers of Heaven, at least that's the English version of their group, no. I think the concern is not more widespread than need be and that's in the areas of the south where they are being dealt with. And again, the Government of Iraq understands that. There was significant numbers of the leadership of that group that were killed and detained as a part of these operations the last 24 hours. So we'll see how that plays out over time. You all know that this is a group

that has historically attacked around the period of Ashura. Last year it was a much more violent period of violence than it was this particular year. Again, still too many injured and killed this past week. But a positive sign of that is the Iraq security forces took immediate steps to keep it from getting out of control. I think if we have one more question.

REP21: Just more specifically, this map shows a significant decrease in al-Qaeda activity. How would you categorize the activity that comes in from Iran? Is it equally as bad? Is it the same? Or, you know, how would we judge the situation? This looks much less but is that the same amount or is it the same thing or...?

RDML SMITH: Yeah. That's a good question. The influence of Iran inside Iraq—because it takes on so many different dimensions, whether it's financial support to the militias here, whether it's actual movement of arms and weapons and equipment into Iraq...smuggled into Iraq, whether it's actual leadership through the Quds Force as we outlined for you early this past year, whether Lebanese Hezbollah are in the country as proxies for the Quds Force—all those questions are very critical questions that we still need to understand ourselves. We do believe that the number of signature weapons that have come from Iran and have been used against coalition and Iraqi

security forces are down dramatically except for this short up tick, as I mentioned, in explosively-formed penetrators in the early part of January. We do not think that the levels of training have been reduced at all. We don't believe the levels of financing have been reduced. But it's uncertain, again, what is happening inside of Iran that's leading to that occurrence. We do know that the Iranian government has given its pledge to the Iraqi government—publicly and privately—to participate in the peaceful transition. It's a mixed message; it really is. And we continue to watch it very, very closely. And with that, I think we'll wrap up today's press briefing. I appreciate your time. Thank you so much.